

NOTES TOWARD A BIOGRAPHY OF  
IBN ABI TAHIR TAYFUR (820-893)

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ABSTRACT

The written word occasioned changes in the organisation and transmission of knowledge in Islamic lands, and in literary and historical writing in Arabic in the ninth century. *Adab* (writerly culture) grew to accommodate those changes. Ibn Abi Tahir Tayfur, an *adib* (practitioner of *adab*) par excellence, was someone whose life was ruled by the existence of the written word. He started out as a tutor (*muaddib*), significantly, one who instructs and imparts *adab*, then became a bookseller-copyist (*warraq, katib*) and scholarly writer with a wide range of literary and historical interests. A study of Ibn Abi Tahir, of the nature of his scholarly and professional alliances, of his literary output, and of his reception and transformation in later works of literary criticism, history, and, indeed, *adab*, thus provides an important focus and point of departure for a new look at the formulation and development of *adab*. Individuals such as Ibn Abi Tahir must be written into the history of *adab*, or any understanding of it and its development will remain inadequate and incomplete. That enterprise must in turn begin with an understanding of Ibn Abi Tahir's background. This article is, therefore, a preliminary attempt to construct his biography.

**Keywords:** *Adab*, Arabic literature, biography, literary history

## INTRODUCTION

In spite of the considerable attention devoted to the ninth century by scholars, credit for the elaboration of the notion of *adab* in its meaning of literature, and especially in its meaning of prose writing, is given to and concentrated upon only a handful of writers. Articulation of a concept as nuanced as *adab* can therefore only benefit from a similarly nuanced theory of its development.

Ibn Abi Tahir (hereafter IAT) was a historian, poet, critic, anthologist and *bon vivant*, born in Baghdad in 820 to parents of Iranian origin<sup>1</sup>. After a career in teaching, he moved to the Bookmen's Market (*suq al-warrāqin*) where he became a copyist-bookseller and author. He is primarily remembered by posterity as the first author of a history of Baghdad, the multi-volume *Book of Baghdad* [Kitāb Baghdad], only volume six of which survives. The few surviving manuscripts, the titles of his lost works, and the countless anecdotes reported on his authority, in such works as Isbahani's *Book of Songs* [Kitāb al-Aghani] and Suli's literary-historical collections, testify to his wide-ranging interests and his considerable contact with administrative, cultural, and literary personalities of his day. An enumeration of these individuals would constitute a veritable who's who of ninth-century Baghdad; suffice to mention here those to whom he was close: Abu Hiffan (d. ca. 871), the transmitter and biographer of Abu Nuwas; the wit Abu al-Ayna (d. 896); the poet Abu Ali al-Basir (d. 865); the great patron and court companion Ali b. Yahya al-Munajjim (d. 888); and the state secretary and epistolographer Saïd b. Humayd (d. after 871). Among his teachers numbered the poet Abu Tamīm (d. ca. 845).

IAT was many things to many people. He was the first author to write the history of Baghdad; the first historian also of the Abbasid caliphate; a poet widely known among the élite and the common folk alike; the premier articulator of a number of poetic themes; the author, according to his distinguished admirer Ibn Durayd, of one of the finest books ever written; an important source of poetical information (*akhhbar*) for the florilegia of later centuries; and a significant editor and anthologist in his own right.

Though he may not appear to have had the same sort of impact as Jahiz (d. 868) and Ibn Qutayba (d. 889) — to single out two of the most mentioned and praised littérateurs — this view is in fact very much a function of received notions about classical Arabic literary culture. Ibn Qutayba, a pro-Arab state secretary of Iranian origin, and the product of the revival of the Sunni orthodoxy, was a publicist of the régime. And Jahiz, however brilliant his excursions, expounded a personal and idiosyncratic literary style not separable from his connections with influential

patrons. Pellat (1953) has noted that "In a large proportion of his works, Jahiz in fact appears as an official writer, charged with announcing, publishing or explaining government decisions, vulgarizing the religious ideas of the moment and... defending the dynasty, Islam, and the Arabs". Both Ibn Qutayba and Jahiz were, thus, defenders of Arabism and vulgarisers of prevailing policies. This helps explain their prominence and pre-eminence in the history of Arabic literature and institutions.

For IAT, however, neither patronage nor official policy were significant (Kimber, 1998; Toorawa, 1998 a). Ibn Abi Tahir chose not to associate closely with the court of the caliph, and operated as an independent (Bencheikh, 1977). Makkisi (1990) has characterised this reluctance by observing that "Those who wished to distance themselves from the governing power... earned their living in professions connected with the production of books or their distribution, plying the trade of the copyist, the copyist-bookseller, the calligrapher". IAT's connections with books, the book trade, and composition are widely attested in the sources.

In order adequately to understand the role of IAT in Arabic cultural, intellectual, and literary history, a knowledge of his circumstances is essential. In the first instance, simple questions such as Who was he? need to be answered. The following is a preliminary attempt to flesh out IAT and to construct something of a biography.

#### *Principal Sources?*

In his study of Ibn Qutayba, Lecomte (1965) refers to the poverty of materials available about him. Compared to Ibn Qutayba, however, information about his contemporary, IAT, is scarce indeed. The most significant source is the biographical notice devoted to him in the *Dictionary of Authors* [Mujam al-Udabal] of Yaqut (d. 1229). Yaqut draws substantially from the earliest extensive notice, that of Ibn al-Nadim (d. 985) in his biobibliographical compendium *The Catalogue* [al-Fihrist]. The notice in the *Classification of Modern Poets* [Tabaqat al-shuara al-muhdathin] of Ibn al-Mutazz (d. 908), though it is the earliest, is not a biographical notice (*tariqama*) *per se* as it does not provide the information usually found in one, such as full name, dates of birth and death, genealogy, and names of important teachers and students. In that respect it is quite the opposite of the notice in the monumental catalogue of the illustrious men and women of Baghdad, the *History of Baghdad* [Tarikh Baghdad] of Khaṭīb (d. 1071), which provides all of this information — if only telegraphically. (For Khaṭīb's reliance on IAT, see Lassner, 1970).

### Sources: Works by IAT

It is true that as a proportion of his entire corpus, precious little of IAT's oeuvre survives (see Toorawa, 1998 a). Even those volumes that are extant are parts of larger multivolume works, namely volume six of the *Book of Baghdad* (Ibn Abi Tahir, 1949), and volumes eleven, twelve, and thirteen of *The Book of Prose and Poetry* [Kitab al-Manthur wa al-Manzum] (Safwat, 1937; Kurd Ali, 1954; Ibn Abi Tahir, 1972, 1977). Indeed, for a great number of writers, often all that survives is an isolated manuscript, or the testimony of others (contemporaries or later scholars) that may or may not include quotations from otherwise lost works. The works of Ibn Aqil (d. 1119) are a case in point (see Ibn Aqil, 1970-71).

But the conspicuous neglect of certain writers, such as IAT, can only partially be explained by the absence of works. Sometimes even what is extant is ignored, unwittingly or intentionally. IAT's remarks about the famous pre-Islamic collection of poems, the 'Muallaqat', in a surviving volume of the *The Book of Prose and Poetry*, for example, significant as they are about the process of collection and the identity of its collectors, went unnoticed and unacknowledged by medieval and modern historians of literature for eleven centuries, and have still to make a significant impact (but see Kister, 1969; Bonebakker, 1971; and now Arazi, 1997).

### NAME AND ORIGIN

#### Name

**Full name.** Ibn al-Nadim, Ibn Abi Tahir's earliest informative biographer, lists his complete name as *Abu al-Fadl Ahmad Ibn Abi Tahir Tayfur*. Yaqut and Khatib, drawing largely from Ibn al-Nadim, refer to him in the same way. In the *Book of Songs*, in which he is indirectly quoted and directly cited more than seventy times, he is referred to primarily as Ahmad Ibn Abi Tahir and less often as Ibn Abi Tahir. The Ibn Abi Tahir in the *History of Scientists* [Tarikh al-Hukama] however (Qifti, 1903), is not our IAT.

**Given name (ism).** There is no doubt that Ahmad was IAT's given name. In a report (*khabar*) emanating from Ibn Mihrawayh in the *Book of Songs*, he is called simply Ahmad b. Tayfur (Isbahani, 1927-73).

**Agnomen (kunya).** IAT's agnomen (*kunya*), Abu al-Fadl, is occasionally used by the biographers and other writers. The agnomen Abu al-Fadl and the given name Ahmad were evidently a popular combination. Ibn Hajar (d. 1449) wrote a work, which does not survive, on people with such a combination of names (Rosenthal,

1968). As Ibn Hajar was familiar with IAT (e.g. Ibn Hajar, 1971), it is reasonable to assume that he included IAT in it. In a chain of transmission (*isnad*) through Muhammad b. Khalaf b. al-Marzuban (d. 921), an important source for the *Book of Songs*, and one of IAT's principal students, he is called Abu al-Fadl al-Marwarrudhi (Ishbani, 1927-73).

**Relator name (*nisba*).** *Al-Marwarrudhi* (and its variants) was IAT's relator name (*nisba*). This is evidently because IAT's origins were Marw al-Rudh (Ibn al-Nadim, 1971), though it is made explicit in all the sources that he was born in Baghdad (see below). Marw al-Rudh was a town on the Murghab river in mediaeval Khurasan. The site is marked by the ruins of the modern Afghan town of Bala Murghab.

**Professional designation (*ism mansib*) and honorific (*laqab*).** IAT is often referred to as *al-Katib* (e.g. Ibn al-Marzuban, 1978). The precise meaning of this in the context of IAT is unclear. Al-Katib usually designates a state secretary or chancery employee, but no state employment is attested for IAT.

Of interest is the fact that Ibn al-Mutazz, Ibn al-Nadim, and Yaqut, who might be termed IAT's 'literary' biographers, make no reference whatsoever to the fact that he was a *katib*. On the other hand, Khathib, Dhahabi, and Sakhawi, who might be termed IAT's 'non-literary' biographers, do refer to him as a *katib*. When the latter do so, however, it is not within the descriptive part of the biographical notice, but as a constitutive part of IAT's name, e.g. Ahmad Ibn Abi Tahir al-Katib Abu al-Fadl (Rosenthal, 1968).

The 'literary' biographers do not use the designation al-Katib, but either name IAT's many works (Ibn al-Nadim, Yaqut) or mention the fact of their number and popularity (Ibn al-Mutazz). Conversely, the 'non-literary' biographers do use the designation al-Katib but only mention one work, the *Book of Baghdad*. And no biographical notice or anecdote makes any reference to chancery employment of any kind (though Shaybani does indirectly imply it [Maqari, 1861]). This suggests that al-Katib is meant to function as an honorific (*laqab*) and not as a professional designation (*ism mansib*). Use of al-Katib thus becomes a way for the name as a whole to draw attention to IAT as a writer. Al-Katib is thus perhaps best rendered "Author," "Writer," or "Learned Writer".

### *Origins*

**IAT's father: Abu Tahir Tayfur.** No biographical notices exist of IAT's father, Abu Tahir Tayfur, but he appears to have been a member of a noble Persian family,

and from Khurasan, as his son's relator name suggests. Also, the name Tayfur is only attested for north-eastern Iran (see further below). Ghayyad (1977) has faulted Brockelmann (1947) for asserting that IAT is descended from a princely Khurasanian family without textual support, but in all likelihood Brockelmann is extrapolating from Ibn al-Nadim's "of the Khurasanian *abna* descended from a princely family". The *abna* of Khurasan were the descendants of the original 'People of Khurasan' regiments (see Omar, 1976; Elad, 1986). They were, consequently, members of the Abbasid aristocracy. Their status was based not only on their membership (or forbears' membership) in the loyal Khurasanian regiments that brought the Abbasids to power, but based also on their descent from Persian nobility (Crone, 1980). IAT himself describes the *abna* as being either of mixed Arab/Persian parentage (*muwalladun*), and thus presumably of low status vis-à-vis pure Arabs and pure Persians, or the sons of Persian notables/nobles (*dihqans*) (Ibn Abi Tahir, 1949). Huart's conjecture that *Tayfur* derives from the Pahlavi *taka puthra*, "children/sons of the dynasty" (1909; Azarnush, 1988; Driver, 1957), and thus corresponds to Ibn al-Nadim's *awlad al-dawlah*, is suggestive (Ibn al-Nadim, 1971), but there is no evidence that Ibn al-Nadim knew any Pahlavi.

**Tayfur, al-Tayfuri.** The word *tayfur* is a noun on a relatively rare pattern deriving from the root T-F-R. According to the major lexica, *tafara* means to jump, leap, bounce, rise, and *tayfur* consequently means a small bird or winged insect (Ibn Manzur, 1981). As noted above, Huart suggested that *tayfur* may come from the Pahlavi *taka-puthra*. It bears pointing out that the word *tayfur* has also been equated with the Greek comet *typhon* (Kennedy, 1957). This may account for the name Tayfur al-din (Comet of the Faith), the honorific of a Syrian mystic said to have been one of the spiritual mentors of Badi al-din Qutb al-Madar (Ansari, 1960). Of interest is the fact that Tayfur, the name, is only attested in the post-classical Islamic period. It is to be found in none of the early name-catalogues (e.g. Justī, 1895). The earliest attestation is the late eighth/early ninth-century.

An author by the name of Ibn Abi Tayfur is mentioned by Ibn al-Nadim (Ibn al-Nadim, 1971). He is described as being from Jurjan, a province immediately neighboring Khurasan to the North and North-West. Tayfur b. Isa al-Bistami is the well-known mystic from Bistam in the Qumis province of Khurasan. The eleventh-century author of the *Tuhfa-yi Qutbshahi* who bore the same name, probably did so deferentially. A man by the name of Tayfur was the legal *protégé* (*mawla*) of Khayzurān, mother of the caliph Harun al-Rashid and wife of the caliph Mahdi (Qifri, 1903; Crone, 1980). He is not explicitly described as Iranian, but his genealogy is uncertain. The Muhammad b. Tayfur mentioned by Ibn al-Jarrah (d. 908) is described as the maternal uncle of the caliph Hadi (1953). Hadi's mother

was of Iranian origin. The relator name of Ali b. Tayfur b. Ghailb — al-Nasai — indicates that he was from Nasa, a town in Khurasan.

There is an attestation of the name in the mid-thirteenth century in Qifti's *Inbah*, namely Muhammad b. Tayfur al-Sajawandi al-Ghaznawi (Qifti, 1950). And the name of the marshall (*shihnah*) of Samargand at the time of Genghis Khan's arrival in 1220 was also apparently Tayfur (Bar Hebraeus, 1958).

Two figures known as al-Tayfuri, i.e. related in some way to someone named Tayfur, are mentioned by Samani (1912). Both have someone by the name of Tayfur as an ancestor. One of them, Abu Bakr Abdallah b. Bahr b. Abdallah b. Tayfur, is additionally identified as al-Naysaburi, i.e. from the town of Nishapur, the capital of Khurasan. Samani notes that he bore this relator name because of his ancestor Tayfur.

As a person's given name, Tayfur is thus attested primarily for individuals from Khurasan, the large north-east Iranian province that first came under Muslim influence and control about the year 651. This underscores IAT's and his father's Khurasanian origin. His mother would also seem to have been of Khurasanian origin. This is indirectly but unverifiably corroborated by the origin of her sister's son. According to Isbahani (1927-73), the name of this cousin of IAT's was Abu Amr al-Tusi. The relator name al-Tusi affiliates him to the town of Tus, which is in Khurasan.

In the late-tenth century, a square in Baghdad went by the name 'Rahbat Tayfur' (Ibn al-Athir nd). A certain Abu Bakr Umar b. Abd Allah b. Muhammad b. Harun al-Bazzaz al-Tayfuri (d. 973) of Samarra apparently lived in the Square (Yaqut 1868). Yaqut (1868) also describes a town by the name of Tayfurabadh as being an outlying village of Isbahan.

The relator name al-Tayfuri is also to be found in Andalusia. The town of Bajah (in present-day Portugal) came under the control of a local family of notables known as the Tayfuris. Ibn Said (d. 1286) mentions an Abu Amr b. Tayfur in his own time (Ibn Said, 1986). And an Ibn Tayfur became king (*malik*) of Mértola, a city incorporated into Sevilla, in 1044 (Zamharir, 1927). The relationship of the Andalusian Tayfuris of Bajah and Ibn Tayfur of Mértola to their Khurasanian homonym is unclear and remains to be investigated.

## DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH

### *Date of birth*

All the sources, citing IAT's son Ubaydallah, are agreed about the year of his birth, namely the time of the caliph Mamun's triumphant entry into Baghdad from Khurasan in the year 204 H, which corresponds to the period extending from 28 June 819 to 16 June 820. Although no precise date is recorded, Khaqani (1962) takes the sources "at the time of Mamun's arrival in Baghdad from Khurasan" literally and has IAT's date of birth occur on the very day of Mamun's arrival, Saturday 16 Safar, 204 H, i.e. Saturday 12 August, 819. But this is unlikely as the phrase "day of Mamun's arrival" would no doubt have been used had it coincided precisely.

### *Place of birth*

The sources are also agreed on Baghdad as the place of IAT's birth. No mention is made of a specific location. From two anecdotes, we know that IAT lived in the area of Bab al-Sham (Suli, 1958; Yaqt, 1980). It seems reasonably likely that IAT was born in this area, or in Harbiyah, neighboring Bab al-Sham, perhaps in the Marawiza Quarter, that area of the suburb inhabited by people from Marw. The Marawiza Quarter lay about half a mile north of the Bab al-Sham (Syrian Gate) and was oriented East-West along the Dujayl Road, so-named for the canal that ran alongside it. To the east lay, among other things, the Orphan School (Kuttab al-Yatama). To the north was the Quadrangle of the Persians (Murabbaat al-Furs), "where a branch canal went off to the place known as the Shops of the Persian Nobles (Dukkan al-Abna)" (Le Strange, 1900). Of Bab al-Sham itself, Yaqubi (1883: 248), writing in or after 892, states that it was populated by people whose origins were in Balkh, Marw, and Bokhara.

## EDUCATION

### *School*

The first fourteen years or so of IAT's life, from 819 to 833, approximately the time he would have spent in preparatory school (*maktab or kuttab*), span much of Mamun's caliphate in Baghdad. It is the events of these years which are described in the one surviving volume of Ibn Abi Tahir's history, the *Book of Baghdad*. They are not described from memory but collected rather from accounts carefully attributed to other *akhtar*-transmitters. But they are, nonetheless, events to which Ibn Abi Tahir must have been a young witness.



The preparatory school was the place where the seeds of IAT's training as a prose writer and a poet were no doubt planted. His student Muhammad b. Dawud (d. 909), for example, is said to have begun composing his anthology, *The Flower* (Kitab al-Zahra) while still in school. Muhammad's father reports having seen most of *The Flower* before he died, when his son was only fifteen (Khatib, 1931).

#### *Post-preparatory education*

Beyond his preparatory education, it is not known whether IAT apprenticed with a particular teacher or whether he studied on his own. Several lecturers and professors are mentioned, such as Rayhani (Yāqūt, 1980; Ibn Agil, 1970-71) and Umar b. Shabbah (Khatib, 1931), but their precise professional relationships to IAT are not described. If IAT apprenticed, it would have been either in a chancery or under the tutelage of a particular master. Perhaps it was this training that earned him the epithet al-Katib found appended to his name in some sources. Such employment might also explain his access to the letters he anthologised in *The Book of Prose and Poetry*, some of which are preserved there alone, and others of which are recorded first in that collection. But chancery training and government service cannot be confirmed. In the absence of any concrete evidence about his post-preparatory studies, suggestions about that period of his life must remain speculative.

### PROFESSIONAL LIFE

#### *Transmitter (rawi)*

IAT is described by most biographers as a *rawi* (reciter of poetry; transmitter; narrator). He does recite the verse of other poets, e.g. Nabighah and Abu Nuwas (Marzubani, 1965) but that recitation is more often than not evidential. The one noteworthy exception is in the *Book of the Flower* where Ibn Dawud quotes IAT's transmissions sixteen times. In IAT's case, it seems that his role as a *rawi*-commentator overtook his role as a *rawi*-transmitter. In his role of *rawi*-commentator, IAT's interests extended to include three overlapping areas, (1) anthology (*ikhtiyar*), (2) biography (*akhdar*), and (3) literary borrowings (*sariqah*). This is borne out by the surviving extracts, and titles, of his lost works (see Toorawa, 1998 a).

#### *Poet*

Little serious critical attention has been paid to IAT's poetry. It is true that only three of numerous biographical dictionaries of poets composed in the ninth century survive and that Ibn Abi Tahir is to be found in only one of them, *The Classification*

of *Modern Poets*. But that influential work describes his verses as well-known and widely diffused (Ibn al-Mutazz, 1968). Judging from the two extracts Ibn al-Mutazz quotes - and indeed from much of Ibn Abi Tahir's other poetry - it was probably a combination of the wit he displayed in his verses and his modern(ist) sensibilities that guaranteed them wide circulation (Abu Deeb, 1990). This poetic ability is recognised even by the relatively late Sakhawi (d. 1497) (Rosenthal, 1968) who calls IAT "a genuine poet and outstanding stylist". And whilst IAT's poetry may not have been collected into a single volume (*diwan*), even a cursory glance at the florilegia of the tenth and later centuries reveals that he continued to be widely quoted. The current tally is 127 extracts, comprising 417 lines (the partial listing in Azarnush [1988] is superseded by the collection in Toorawa [1998 a]).

### *Teacher/Bookman*

The only categorical statement about IAT's professions is made by Jafar b. Hamdan (d. 935) and may tentatively be translated as follows:

Ahmad Ibn Abi Tahir was a public schoolteacher (*muaddib kuttab ammiyan*). He then specialised (*takhasasa*) and established himself (*jalasa fi*) in the Bookmen's Market in East Baghdad (Ibn al-Nadim, 1971).

This passage, which at first blush seems simply to recount the circumstances of IAT's professional life, poses a number of problems that arise mainly from the difficulty in establishing precisely what is meant by several of the Arabic terms. It seems most likely that IAT first taught in a public school and then specialised by becoming a private tutor. There is no direct evidence that IAT became a *warraq* (bookseller, paper worker, copyist, stationer, publisher) *per se* upon moving to the Bookseller's Market, but he does appear to have set up shop and/or residence there. Indeed, he might have simply moved there in order to have access to a literary scene that was becoming inevitably and inextricably linked to the market for knowledge and to the marketplace (see the analysis in Toorawa, 1998 a).

### *Storyteller*

IAT's storytelling has attracted the attention of no medieval or modern biographer in spite of Ibn al-Nadim's explicit identification of him as one of the persons who wrote fables (*khurafat*) and evening stories (*asmar*) (Ibn al-Nadim, 1971). Ibn al-Nadim does not name any of IAT's soirées or fable books in the section on storytellers but does mention the following four works in the IAT notice: (1) *The Education of Hurmuz Kisra Anushirwan* [Kitab Tarbiyat Hurmuz b. Kisra b. Anushirwan], (2)

*The Account of the Great King and the Management and Administration of the Kingdom* [Kitab Khabar al-Malik al-Ali fi Tadbir al-Mamlakah wa al-Siyasah], (3) *The Story of the Virtuous King and the Supportive Vizier* [Kitab al-Malik al-Muslih wa al-Wazir al-Muini], and (4) *The Story of the Tyrannical Babylonian and Egyptian Kings and the Wise Byzantine King* [Kitab al-Malik al-Babiti wa al-Malik al-Misri al-Baghayyan wa al-Malik al-Hakim al-Rumij]. These are no doubt the sorts of stories IAT composed and/or recounted. They also demonstrate IAT's interest in mirror-for-princes works (*Fürstenspiegel*).

IAT's century, the ninth, was in fact formative in the development of storytelling. Of Ibn al-Nadim's five named fabulists, all but one is from that century. Jahshiyari's collection of evening-stories dates from late in that same century. The reign of Muradid (892-902) is specifically identified by Masudi (1974) as one during which the popularity of storytellers increased. In a celebrated article, Abbott (1949) has dated a papyrus fragment of the 'Thousand and One Nights' to the ninth century, and more recently Stephen Belcher (1987) has pointed out the importance of that century in the diffusion of the *Book of Sindbad*.

### SECTARIAN AFFILIATION

No biographer or writer pronounces on the question of IAT's doctrinal affiliation, nor does IAT make a statement about it himself. The professional contacts he developed and the friendships he cultivated also give no indication. The one possible argument in favor of Shiism is his elegy on Yahya b. Umar, a Shiite rebel killed in Kufa in 864 on the order of the caliph Mustain (reigned 862-66). In this elegy, mentioned and quoted only by Masudi (1974), IAT attacks the Sunni caliphal family for its usurpation of the rights of the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima and her husband Ali.

But, as the great writer Maarri (d. 1057) observed about the poet Ibn al-Rumi, one of IAT's contemporaries whose Shiism was also inferred from an elegy to the same Yahya b. Umar: the imputing of Shiite beliefs on the basis of publicly recited elegies is open to serious question (Maarri, 1950; Boustany, 1967). For Maarri, this sort of Shiism is nothing more than a conceit, a 'Shiism of poets', as it were.

IAT is of no identifiable doctrinal stripe, partly because none of his works, or their titles, reflects any tendencies or sectarian biases. He is, in fact, especially interesting for the fact that he is one of very few writers who does not appear to have been involved in the many sectarian, doctrinal, and theological issues of the day.

## DATE AND PLACE OF DEATH

### *Date of death*

Ibn al-Nadim, Yaqut and Khatib all cite IAT's son Ubaydallah for his father's date of death, the year 280 H, corresponding to the period extending from 23 March 893 to 12 March 894. Masudi (1974) also records this date, but without citing his source. Only Khatib (1931) indicates an exact date: the night of Tuesday 28 Jumada al-Ula 280 H. This corresponds to the night of Tuesday 15 August 893, correcting Rosenthal (1971).

### *Place of death*

IAT was buried in the Bab al-Sham Cemetery (Khatib, 1931), i.e. in the neighborhood in which he lived later in life. The cemetery, which was built by the founder of Baghdad, the caliph Mansur, was probably the city's first. "In course of time much of its area came to be built over by the houses of the Harbiya and adjacent quarters, though as late as the beginning of the... tenth century... mention is made of this cemetery where *personages of note* were still buried" (Le Strange, 1900, emphasis added).

## DESCENDANTS

### *IAT's son Ubaydallah*

Abu al-Husayn Ubaydallah b. Ahmad b. Abi Tahir (on whom, see Toorawa (1998 c), is mentioned in the principal biographical notices devoted to his father. The only (extant) notices devoted exclusively to him are in *The History of Baghdad* and in the *The Catalogue*. Neither, however, provides much information about his life (e.g. his date of birth remains unknown). Because both say much about IAT, I quote them in full:

His son, Ubayd Allah b. Ahmad Ibn Abi Tahir, whose agnomen was Abu al-Husayn. He followed the example of his father in compiling and writing but he quoted less than his father did. Ahmad [= IAT] was also more knowledgeable, skillful and brilliant in composition. Among the books of Abu al-Husayn was a supplement to his father's book about the history (*akhhbar*) of Baghdad. His father wrote until the end of the period of Muhtadi, while Abu al-Husayn added traditions about Mutamid, traditions about Mutadid, traditions about Muktafi, and traditions about

Muqtadir, which he did not complete. Among his books were: *Sikbaj and its Excellencies* [Kitab Sikbaj wa fadailiha], and *Women and Men Who Affect Elegance* [al-Mutazarifar wa al-mutazarifin] (Ibn al-Nadim, 1971).

*Ubaydallah b. Ahmad Ibn Abi Tahir.* Abu Tahir's given name was Tayfur. Ubaydallah's agnomen was Abu al-Husayn. His origin was the town of Marw al-Rudh. He studied his father's book about traditions pertaining to Baghdad, in which he [= IAT] enumerates its rulers and explicates events that occur in it. Ali b. Harun al-Munajjim and Abu Umar b. Hayawayh studied with Ubaydallah. Ali b. Ali related to us that Muhammad b. al-Abbas b. Hayawayh said: Abu al-Husayn Ibn Abi Tahir [sic] died in the year 313 H [= 925] (Khatib, 1931).

The mention of Ubaydallah in the biographical literature rests on the fact that he is his father's son, that he studied with his father, and that he wrote a continuation of his father's history of Baghdad and its caliphs. Ubaydallah's continuation does not survive but extracts are quoted in later works (e.g. Ibn Khallikan, 1972; Magrizi, 1911).

#### *Al-Muhammad al-Baghdadi*

A poet by the name of Tahir b. Muhammad, known as al-Muhammad al-Baghdadi (on whom, see Toorawa, 1998 b), is mentioned by the Andalusian scholar Humaydi (d. 1095) (Humaydi nd, 1/383; repeated verbatim in Dabbi [d. 1202] 1968: 326). Humaydi begins his biographical notice with the following statement: "It is said that he is one of the descendants of Ahmad b. Abi Tahir, the author of *The History of Baghdad* [sic]." But Tahir's full name, Abu al-Abbas Tahir b. Muhammad b. Abdallah b. Muhammad b. Musa b. Ibrahim, which is preserved in a notice that predates Humaydi's, that of Ibn al-Faradi (d. 1013) in the *Tarikh ulama al-Andalus* [History of the learned men of Andalusia], suggests that he is not a direct descendant of IAT (Ibn al-Faradi, 1983). Perhaps Tahir was a grand-nephew.

Ibn al-Faradi provides details such as Tahir's date and place of birth, in Baghdad in Ramadan 315 H, i.e. November 927; the date of his departure for Cordoba, 390 H (= 951); and the date of his death in Cordoba, Muharram 390 H, which corresponds to December 999. However, Ibn al-Faradi makes no mention of a connection between Tahir and IAT. Ibn al-Faradi is thus (i) unaware of the connection between the poet and IAT (though he is very informed about him otherwise); (ii) does not

record the connection; or (iii) IAT and his *Book of Baghdad* had not reached Ibn al-Faradi's attention. The latter is less likely because even if he did not have direct access to works by IAT, he would, at the very least, have had access to Razi's history of Cordoba, known to be modeled on IAT's *Book of Baghdad*. Humaydi's contemporary, the great historian Ibn Hayyan (d. 1076) also mentions his compatriot Tahir but, like Ibn al-Faradi, does not tie him to IAT (Ibn Hayyan, 1983).

Tahir was an accomplished poet and man of letters who visited al-Mansur billah, the Almanzor of Spanish sources, who ruled as chief minister (*hajib* and *wazir*) during the first reign of the Spanish Umayyad Hisham II al-Muayyad: he was the de facto ruler of Islamic Spain from 978 to 1002. Tahir earned Mansur's favor and patronage through his literary ability. Humaydi's biographical notice closes with the remark that reports (*akhhbar*) are told about Tahir's spiritual contemplations and how this espousal of the ways of the heretic mystic Hallaj led people to have a low opinion of him. Resonantly, but possibly only coincidentally, IAT's son Ubaydallah wrote about al-Hallaj in his *History* (quoted in Ibn al-Nadim, 1971).

#### *Muhammad b. Yazid al-Tayfuri*

An Abu Bakr Muhammad b. Yazid b. Jafar b. Muhammad b. Ahmad b. Tayfur al-Tayfuri (d. 959) is mentioned by Samani (1912). The genealogy suggests that he is a descendant of IAT, even if the number of intervening generations casts doubt on the relationship.

#### **CLOSING REMARKS**

I have elsewhere attempted to evaluate the contribution of IAT to the development of *adab* (Toorawa, 1998 a). In that study I attempted to identify IAT's professional affiliations and doctrinal preferences, to draw a sociogram of him and his associates, and to assess the impact of writerly and bookish culture on him and others like him. Here, I have focused, rather, on his biography. Constructing IAT's biography is rendered difficult by the fact that little material, relatively speaking, is available by, or about, him. But three important observations can be drawn, further research into which will no doubt prove important to the rearticulation of a history of *adab* in the ninth century.

The first of these concerns IAT's Khurasanian background. As Madelung (1988), and others besides, have observed, the role of Khurasan in the formation of an Arab-Islamic identity is of great importance and has not received the attention it deserves. IAT provides a convenient point of departure for a study of the role of Khurasanians in the development of *adab* in particular.

The second is the fact that he is not of any identifiable doctrinal stripe, especially at a time when it appears that one's religious, sectarian, theological, or juridical affiliations mattered. IAT is an important example of someone who seems to have operated above, or outside of, the doctrinal fray. Equally interesting in this regard is the fact that he is one of only a handful of prolific writers of the ninth century who did not concern himself with religious scholarship in any way.

The third is that IAT, though not widely biographed, is evidently widely quoted and well-known to posterity. He has, moreover, left an important legacy. And yet, very little of his output survives, curiously perhaps (Allen, 1998). An enquiry into the reasons for this neglect may suggest general reasons for the neglect of certain writers, and the privileging of others. I have already suggested that this may be connected to the fact that IAT and others did not seek high profile patronage (Toorawa, 1998 a), but the issue needs further investigation.

Whatever else may be said about IAT, he is without doubt one of the most interesting authors and scholars of an important century in the history of Arabic literature, culture, and institutions.

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of non-specialists, transliteration has been simplified as much as possible; specialists will have no difficulty recognizing names and words. The abbreviation 'b' for 'ibn', 'son of', has been retained. Dates of death are included after the names of authors. Common Era dates are used but Hijri dates (denoted 'H') are mentioned where necessity dictates. Translations throughout are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Principal primary sources (in chronological order): Ibn al-Mutazz (1968); Masudi (1974); Ibn al-Nadim (1971); Marzubani (1965); Khatib (1931); Yaqut (1980); Dhahabi (1984); Sakhawi = Rosenthal (1968); Hajji Khalifah (1941-43). Principal secondary sources (in chronological order): Keller (1908); Brockelmann (1937, 1943); Krachkovsky (1955); Khaqani (1962); Boustany (1967); Sezgin (1969); Rosenthal (1971); Dayf (1973); Sezgin (1975); Ghayyad (1977); Azarnush (1988); Kimber (1998); Toorawa (1998 a)